

4-H Living Interactive Family Education Program

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Program of Distinction Category:

Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills Categories

- Leadership Development
- Caring Relationships
- Diversity and Inclusive Environments

Healthy Lifestyles Categories

- Healthy Relationships, Good Decisions

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Knowledge and Research Base

An invisible population exists in the United States. Rising incarceration rates have left an indelible mark on the structures of many families. The toll that incarceration has on children of offenders has often been overlooked. The United States Department of Justice indicated in 1999 that an estimated 721,500 State and Federal prisoners were parents to 1,498,800 children under age 18 (Mumola, 2000). Furthermore, the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents reports that on any given day in the U.S., there are over 2 million minor children (children under the age of 18) with an incarcerated parent (*How Many Children of Incarcerated Parents Are There?*, 2001). Reviews of the existing literature provide ample evidence that regular visitation can have a dramatic impact and can reduce the impact of negative stressors on the child of an offender. In fact, children who visit their incarcerated parents score higher on measures of well-being, IQ, emotional adjustment, and behavioral measures (Johnston, 1995). Despite this fact, it should be noted that the structure of regular visiting rooms can be overwhelming for children. Regular visitation settings allow only a minimal amount of physical contact, and are extremely restrictive for children who are accustomed to intensive, repeated physical interaction with their parents (Block & Potthast, 2001).



Physical Contact and Interaction are keys to the 4-H L.I.F.E. Program

Needs Assessment

Two focus groups were conducted in 1999 with families of offenders in Missouri. The goals of these meetings were to look at ways University Extension could help families of incarcerated men and women, particularly those with children, by addressing their unique issues. The groups were asked to identify barriers and difficulties that disrupted their family cohesiveness. The results of the meetings indicated that the top five issues that participants faced as a result of having a loved one incarcerated were: insufficient family programs, parent-child separation, communication difficulties, loss of income, and lack of connection to resources.

By identifying these issues, the planning of the program could be designed to meet the needs of the audience. The creation of a family strengthening program was desperately needed. Furthermore, the needs identification allowed program staff to select curricula and design a program that would focus on issues such as parent separation, empathy, budgeting, healthy lifestyles, and communication. These needs were the foundation for the development of the Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) program.

Goals and Objectives

The purpose of the LIFE Program is to help children and youth successfully overcome some of the challenges of parental incarceration. The anticipated long-term impacts of the program were incorporated into a Program Logic Model and included the following:

- improving children's self esteem and social skills
- reducing their sense of isolation
- helping them stay in school longer
- helping them maintain long-term relationships with their fathers
- helping them become better leaders and citizens
- reducing their risk of incarceration

The LIFE Program works to achieve these long-term impacts in two ways. First, it provides an enhanced visitation environment for children and their incarcerated fathers. In contrast to the traditional prison visit setting, the enhanced

visitation environment helps children and their fathers develop stronger and healthier relationships. The second way that the LIFE Program helps these children is by involving them in 4-H programming. 4-H programming is designed to promote positive youth development by helping children and youth develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will allow them to become productive and contributing members of society. At the 4-H meetings of the LIFE Program, children and their fathers work together on traditional 4-H club activities. These include curricula-based activities focused on the development of life skills, such as conflict resolution, substance abuse resistance, teamwork, and character development. The successes in achieving the stated goals are measured through the use of a Life Skills Survey that is administered every six months.



Father and son display a LIFE membership certificate at a 4-H banquet

Target Audience

The target audience for the program is incarcerated fathers, their children, grandchildren and their other family members. Due to the unique situation of many of these families, the family structures of program participants vary greatly. The term "incarcerated father" is utilized as the primary definition of the incarcerated individual who participates in the program. However, the term is used more broadly. The program is open to any male who meets behavioral standards as set by the Missouri Department of Corrections and serves as a male role model to children and youth in his family unit. This allows for older brothers, uncles, grandfathers, and stepfathers to participate in the program. The program is open to all religions, ages, races, and backgrounds. The term 'care-giver' is used to identify family members who travel with the children to prison and participate in the meetings. These individuals may be wives, parents, grandparents, or brothers and sisters of the incarcerated father. Many times, these individuals are the grandparents attempting to raise the children of the offenders. The Potosi Correctional Center is located in rural Southeast Missouri. The participants in the 4-H LIFE program come from all around the state but the program is conducted at the Potosi Correctional Center. Potosi is a community of less than 10,000 people.

Program Design and Content

Type of Program

The Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) program is an enhanced visitation program at the Potosi Correctional Center (PCC), a maximum security prison in Mineral Point, Missouri. The LIFE program was developed jointly between the incarcerated fathers and local 4-H staff to address the needs of children of

incarcerated parents. The overall objective of the LIFE program is to promote a strong, healthy, and nurturing family environment for children of incarcerated fathers, while helping those fathers become positive role models and mentors.



4-H Members participate in family-strengthening activities

Methods used to deliver the program

The LIFE program consists of three main components: 4-H activities, parenting training, and planning/coordination. The 4-H activities are held monthly at the Potosi Correctional Facility in rural Washington County. At the monthly meetings, children, their fathers, and the care-givers work together on traditional 4-H club activities such as arts and crafts projects and other curricula-based activities that focus on subjects such as conflict resolution, substance abuse resistance, teamwork, and character development. Working together as a team on 4-H projects gives children an opportunity to show their fathers that they are able and intelligent, and provides fathers with an opportunity to show their children that they can provide capable and caring parental guidance.

All fathers who participate in the LIFE program also attend monthly parenting skills classes. The classes allow the fathers to develop the skills needed to interact in a positive and caring way towards their children. The third meeting is the planning/coordination meeting. During this meeting, the fathers actually help design and plan the 4-H youth and family activities. The group has a constitution and elected officers. The group also uses this time to work on fundraisers and restorative justice projects.

Curricula and/or educational materials

All activities are derived from a variety of research-based curricula, including Family Times (Wisconsin Extension), Building Strong Families, Tackling the Tough Skills, and True Colors. Building Strong Families is now being used in nearly every correctional center in Missouri. In addition, the Living Interactive Family Education program has served as a pilot site for a Building Strong Families Youth Curricula. 4-H Curricula is also used in working with children and youth. All of these educational materials have been juried by educational professionals and have been deemed to be and have been judged to be high quality. These materials allow the children to learn via the experiential learning model. This method allows youth to gain skills and share experiences with their families. Craft projects and family celebrations are also important to the structure of the LIFE program. Many participants have little or no shared family history and memories. Participation in the LIFE family allows the members to create craft projects and celebrate successes and significant life experiences from which they can begin to develop a shared family history.

Building Strong Families:

The Building Strong Families: Challenges and Choices program helps families build strengths, face challenges, and make choices. The program covers 13 topics and uses hands-on activities to involve participants. Over 300 facilitators from Extension and various agencies (e.g., community action, schools, social services) have completed certification training. Over 2,000 participants have been reached since 1997. Building Strong Families is based on research showing family members can make significant changes in their behavior by focusing on strengths rather than on problems. The program was developed by the University of Missouri.

Family Times:

The 4-H Youth Development and Family Living Education Programs, University of Wisconsin-Extension created this workbook in 1987. The book includes activities to help all types of families take inventory of its strengths and weaknesses, to decide together what you want your family to become, and to work toward those goals. Activities are divided by concept (e.g., communication, affirmation and caring). There is also an Activities Index that separates the activities according to age level. The Wisconsin Clearinghouse distributes this book.

Tackling the Tough Skills: The Tackling the Tough Skills curriculum includes 218 humorously illustrated pages 76 of which educators may copy and use as overheads or handouts. The curriculum was originally designed to help individuals transition from welfare to work. However, it can be used with a wide variety of audiences. While the curriculum builds from one component to the next, educators also may select individual sections or exercises to supplement other training materials. The curriculum encourages original, highly interactive group learning experiences and provides direction for original role-plays and discussions and offers overheads, games and activity exercises to help motivate and challenge participants to get involved. Tackling the Tough Skills was developed by University of Missouri Staff.

True Colors: One popular method to explore temperament type is called True Colors™. Don Lowery developed the True Colors™ concept to help people understand and apply the research on personality and temperament assessment. As the name implies, True Colors™ uses colors as a metaphor to describe four major temperament types. The selection of the four colors was based on their psychological and physiological relevance to the particular temperament attributes. Through self-evaluation, individuals discover the color spectrum that describes their individual temperament. Although everyone contains elements of each of the four temperament types, a person's primary or first color will generally describe the core values, preferences and skills that are most significant to the person's self-esteem. Therefore, identifying and understanding our primary color is the key to the self-awareness that can guide us to a satisfying career.

Partnerships or collaborations

The LIFE Program is a collaborative effort within and outside of University of Missouri Extension. Within Extension, 4-H Youth Development and Human Environmental Sciences work together to provide holistic programs for the entire family involved in the LIFE Program. Collaboration also occurs with the Missouri Department of Corrections, the incarcerated fathers, and their family members. Stakeholders worked with LIFE Program staff and an evaluator to develop a LIFE Program Logic Model, by-laws, and videos about the issues of incarcerated fathers and the LIFE program itself. The LIFE program collaborates with organizations on the local level. The Washington County University Extension Council serves as a source of local support and advocacy. Program staff report to the council and keep them informed about programmatic development, changes and evolution. In addition, the LIFE program works with the Washington County Community Partnership, an agency that is charged with developing community-based supports and services to enhance the well-being of children, families, and the stability and economic viability of the communities where they live. The Washington County Community Partnership serves as a clearinghouse of information and resources for local community members who may be dealing with the burden of parental incarceration.

Program Evaluation

Process

Several research methods have been used to evaluate the impacts of the LIFE Program. First, basic information on program participation is maintained using an output tracking system. This on-going data collection effort provides reliable information on the number of program participants, their demographic characteristics, and alerts program staff to any changes in program participation that might be occurring over time.

The evaluation also included focus group research in which the LIFE fathers were interviewed about the perceived impacts of the program on their children. The results of that research indicate that the program has intermediate effects on the parent-child relationship that translate into long-term benefits for the child. These research findings are illustrated in selected video footage from two documentaries that focus on the LIFE program and incarcerated fathers located at <http://outreach.missouri.edu/fcrp/lifeevaluation/life.htm>

A third component of the program evaluation focuses on changes in the life skills of the children and youth who participate. This component relies on a survey, which is administered twice a year and covers seven categories of life skills: academics and learning, goal setting and goal achievement, decision making, problem solving, communication, social competencies, and self-esteem. The results indicate that the LIFE Program has helped children and youth to improve their social competencies, communications skills, and decision-making skills. In the last four quarters, there has been an average of 23 children and youth participating in monthly 4-H activities on the second Saturday of each month. Typical demographic breakdown for LIFE participants in the last year included: six (6) White fathers, three (3) Black fathers, seven (7) White youth/children, six (6) Black youth/children, and one (1) Multi-racial youth/child.

Outcomes and Impacts

The Life Skills assessment is the primary tool used to gather information on the impact of the LIFE Program. A summary of the maximum possible score for the life skills assessment is 140 points, since each of the 28 questions can receive between one and five points. The scores in the first round of the assessment (conducted in 2002) provided a baseline picture of how the participants rated themselves in key life skills areas. The results were telling: the average total score for the sample was only 67 percent (94 out of a possible 140 points). This indicates that, on average, respondents did not rate themselves highly in a number of skills areas. The average score in January 2003 increased to 75 percent (105 out of a possible 140 points). This indicates that there have been some improvements in life skills among the children and youth participating in the LIFE Program. While there were improvements in every category, the greatest improvements came in social competencies (up 23 percent), communication (up 18 percent), and decision making (up 12 percent).

Average Scores by Category, July 2002 and January 2003 (percent)

Life Skills Category	Round 1: July 2002 (n=7)	Round 2: January 2003 (n=9)	Percent change in average scores
Academics/learning	70	74	+6
Goal setting/achievement	62	67	+8
Decision making	69	77	+12
Problem solving	70	76	+9
Communication	60	71	+18
Social competencies	66	81	+23
Self esteem	75	80	+7
Total Score	67	75	+12

Communication to stakeholders

Stakeholder communication is carried out through a variety of channels. A newsletter is sent to all the offenders and their families on a monthly basis to communicate relevant news and information pertaining to the program. Program staff has met regularly and have conducted several workshops and presentations at local, state, and national conferences. Each month, program staff report to the local extension council about the program. The LIFE program has also been the subject of positive media coverage in both print and video. Information pertaining to the program is detailed in both the Washington County Extension Annual Report and the Children Youth and Families at Risk Annual Report. Finally, relevant information regarding the program is available on the Internet through the Family and Community Resource website.

Program Sustainability

The program is supported by University of Missouri Extension through a Children Youth and Families at Risk Grant. The funding for this grant ends in May of 2005. However, the structure of the program allows for inherent sustainability. The incarcerated fathers raise funds within the prison through sales of food and collection of aluminum cans for recycling, and have their own account and funds. The LIFE program receives approximately \$400 dollars every three months from the recycling project and approximately \$500 dollars per year from food sales. The funds are overseen by the Institutional Activities Coordinator at the institution and are used for programmatic activities. The funds are also used to enroll the youth as 4-H members. The monthly expenses will be covered through fundraising activities of the offenders within the institution. In addition to fundraising efforts, members pay yearly dues for membership in the program. These funds are used to cover program expenses. The LIFE program has made several significant donations of \$100 dollars to local community organizations and national charities. The low-cost of the program makes the overall sustainability of the program easier. The average cost of materials and supplies for the program is only \$35.00 dollars per month.

Replication

The results of the evaluation of the LIFE program indicate that it has led to substantial positive impacts on the children who participate. In January 2003, Missouri Department of Corrections staff met with the University of Missouri Extension project director to discuss the LIFE Program. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Department of Correction's Director of Reentry Programs told the Extension staff that she would like to see the LIFE program in every male and female correctional facility in the state. Plans are underway to move forward on that effort, and a planning meeting of all stakeholders (e.g., Extension staff, Dept. of Corrections, family members) was held on March 9, 2004 in St. Louis, Missouri. In addition, the LIFE program was the recipient of a Missouri 4-H Foundation Expansion Grant in order to replicate the program at three other institutions within the state of Missouri. The Expansion Grant also provided funds to create a manual for individuals interested in replicating the program in other states. The manual will provide the information needed to start the program and what steps need to be taken to implement the program. Replication of the LIFE program looks very promising, especially since the expansion mirrors the partnership developed at the local level.

Rational and Importance of the Program



Children interact with their parents and caregivers in a family-oriented environment

The social cost of parental incarceration is beyond measure. The LIFE Program serves as a model of how to meet the needs of the families of offenders. The program offers the opportunity to break the cycle of incarceration and to remove barriers between offenders and their families. The 4-H Club Model is a proven mechanism for youth development and serves as a catalyst for the growth of character and life skills in youth. The 4-H LIFE Program serves as an example of how to develop programs on the local level to meet the needs of high-risk audiences. Furthermore, the program brings resources to youth who are often overlooked and underrepresented. These children need the structure, the learning and leadership opportunities, and the sense of belonging, as much, if not more, than any other classification of youth in our state. More importantly, our society needs these youth to become caring, competent, capable, and contributing citizens instead of another generation of incarcerates.

References

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